NCA
VOC FOR PGM/FN
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RICHARK KILIAN/GENEVA

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RED CROSS AND POLITICAL PRISONERS

ANNCR :

FOR SEVERAL DAYS THE STREETS OF PLACID GENEVA HAVE BEEN FILLED WITH MARCHING PEOPLE. BUT, IN A PLEASANT CHANGE FROM PROTEST, THEIR OBJECT IS TO HONOR A FELLOW TOWNSMAN AND THE UNIQUE INSTITUTION HE FOUNDED -- THE RED CROSS. RICHARD KILIAN HAS THIS BACKGROUND REPORT :

VOICE:

THE NAME HENRY DUNANT IS KNOWN TO ONLY A FEW PEOPLE ... MOST OF THEM SWISS AND MOST OF THOSE, SWISS FROM GENEVA. ON MONDAY (MAY 8), THESE PEOPLE CELEBRATED THE 150TH ANNIVERSARY OF HENRY DUNANT'S BIRTH.

DUNANT'S DEEP CONCERN FOR THE RAVAGED SOLDIERS IN THE BLOODY BATTLE OF SOLFERINO, ITALY IN 1859 LED TO AN INDEPENDENT MEDICAL CORPS. THIS IS TURN PRODUCED THE GENEVA RED CROSS CONVENTION IN 1864...THE FIRST OF FOUR CONVENTIONS WHOSE GOALS WERE TO MAKE WAR MORE HUMANE BY CARING FOR ITS VICTIMS BOTH MILITARY AND CIVIL. THESE CONVENTIONS NOW COVER THE WOUNDED AND THE SICK, THE TREATMENT OF PRISONERS OF WAR, AND THE PROTECTION OF CIVILIANS IN TIME OF WAR. IT IS A HUGE TASK WHICH THE INTERNATIONAL COMMITTEE OF THE RED CROSS -- AN ALL-SWISS ORGANIZATON -- HANDLES WITH DISCRETION.

TODAY, DURING A RELATIVE LULL IN WORLD CONFLICTS, THE RED CROSS IS TURING ITS ATTENTION TO THE DELICATE AND CONVTROVERSIAL PROBLEM OF POLITICAL PRISONERS. FROM ITS OLD FASHIONED HEA-QUARTERS OVERLOOKING LAKE GENEVA AND THE ALPS, DELEGATES ARE

DISPATCHED REGULARLY TO CHECK ON THE CONDITIONS OF SOME 14,000 POLITICAL PRISONERS HELD IN CUSTODY IN TWENTY-TWO NATIONS. ALTHOUGH INVITED BY THE GOVERNMENTS IN QUESTION, THE DELEGATES REQUEST THAT THEY BE ALONE WHEN THEY INTERVIEW POLITICAL PRISONERS.

THE DELEGATES ARE EITHER PART OF THE 340 RED CROSS STAFF MEMBERS OF SPECIALLY TRAINED SWISS CITIZENS WHO ARE GIVEN LEAVE TO CARRY OUT THEIR TASKS. THEY ENTER PRISONS ARMED WITH CHECK LISTS CONTAINING UP TO 400 QUESTIONS COVERING FOOD, HOUSING, RECREATION, FAMILY VISITS, AND TORTURE. NO OTHER HUMAN RIGHTS GROUPS INCLUDING THE UNITED NATIONS HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION OR AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL, CAN EXERCISE SUCH PRIVILEGES.

REPORTS ON POLITICAL PRISONERS ARE SENT TO THE COUNTRY IN QUESTION AND NO ONE ELSE. DISCRETION...EVEN OBSCURITY.... IS THE ABSOLUTE RULE OF THE RED CROSS IN THIS AREA. THE LEGACY OF PRIVACY ALSO RESULTS FROM RED CROSS WARTIME ACTIVITY IN HELPING PRISONERS OF WAR. SUCH ACTIVITY DEPENDED HEAVILY ON STRICT POLITICAL NEUTRALITY AND KEEPING CLEAR OF THE ISSUES OF JUSTICE.

SOME PEOPLE HAVE CRITICIZED THE RED CROSS FOR MAINTAINING CONTACTS WITH TOLTALITARIAN REGIMES. BUT A RED CROSS OFFICER TOLD THE VOICE OF AMERICA :"WE ARE INTERESTED IN THE PRISONER NOT THE REGIME."

JS/PY